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ABSTRACT

Evidence in recent years has linked a heavy dependence on television news with lower levels of knowledge about various aspects of the political system and negative evaluations of that system (political malaise). Three different sources of data on audience dependence on television news were used (1) to examine more closely the shift toward dependence on television for news, (2) to determine the linkage between needs and dependency, and (3) to determine changes in the linkage between needs and dependency over time. In general, the data supported the arguments that dependence emerges from the social fabric and individual needs, because both these types of variables were related to levels of dependence on the media. But such social classifications do not explain the identified shift to television dependence across time, indicating that there might be a period effect associated with the growth of the medium and corresponding increases in news programing. Any explanatory factor for the increased dependence on television will probably come from an examination of the needs of audience members. It may well be that audience members select television in part to avoid conflict, yet the conflict included in the news presentation of the medium is the very thing producing the frustration they experience. (RL)

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The Growth of TV Dependence:

Tracing the Origins of the Political Malaise

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CS 503 180

The Growth of TV Dependence: Tracing the Origins of the Political Malaise

Evidence has developed in recent years linking a heavy dependence on television news, as contrasted with a dependence on newspapers, with lower levels of knowledge about various aspects of the political system and negative evaluations of that system (Wade & Schramm, 1969; Jackson-Beeck, 1976; M. Robinson, 1976; Clarke and Fredin, 1978; Becker and Fruit, 1979; Becker, Sobowale and Casey, 1979; Cool, 1979; Siemke and Leutscher, 1979; and Becker and Whitney, 1980). While some challenge has been raised (see Miller, Erbring & Goldenberg, 1976; O'Keefe, 1978), much of the data which do exist are consistent with the interpretation of a functional link between dependency and levels of political knowledge and attitudes toward the political system.

While research evidence has developed in the area of effects of media dependency, analyses aimed at isolating the antecendents of media dependency have been sporadic. National surveys conducted by the Roper Organization (see Ladd, 1979) have shown a trend toward television dependence across time. And O'Keefe (1979) has shown that dependency can be affected by such things as the nature of the news event under consideration. Much about the origins of dependence remains unknown.

The Concept of Dependence

While the dependency term has been in the communication literature for many years, having been used by Lazarsfeld at least as early as 1940 (Lazarsfeld, 1940), conceptual definitions have begun to appear only recently. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976), who have used the term most extensively, defined dependency as a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party. Individuals are dependent on the media, then, when those individuals have needs which the media exclusively, most efficiently, or historically satisfy.

While DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach are most concerned with an individual's dependence on a mass media system as opposed to on another communication system, implicit in their formulation is a concern with different types of media systems. Becker and Whitney (1980) have argued explicitly that individuals can be differentially dependent on the various mass media. In other words, individuals may be dependent on television for satisfaction of needs and relatively independent of newspapers. Individuals also may use the different media to satisfy different needs.

Ball-Rokeach and De Fleur view media dependencies as a product of social category memberships, individual needs, the functions the media serve for the individual, the nature of the sociolcultural system and the functions that the media serve for the society as a whole. While comparative data from several social systems or from the same social system over long periods of time would be needed to test the final two propositions, data to test the first three statemens are

more readily available. These three propositions are the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Specifically, data are presented here which examine the relationships between membership in various social categories, such as age and educational groupings, and media dependencies. In addition, data are examined which look at the predictive power of individual needs on dependencies. Finally, data are examined to determine the effects of the functionality of the media on creation of dependencies.

Methods

Three different data sources were used to test these propositions. First, the national data gathered by the Roper Organization for the Television Information Office were reanalyzed to examine more closely the shift toward dependence on television for news. Second, data from a cross-sectional study of adult household heads in Columbus, Ohio, were analyzed to determine the linkage between needs and dependency. Finally, data from a longitudinal study of young and older voters in Madison, Wisconsin, were examined to determine changes in the linkage between needs and dependency over time.

The National Roper Data

The Roper data are the product of periodic samplings of U.S. opinion on and use of the mass media. From 1959 through 1974, the organization fielded nine surveys, each involving nearly 2000 personal interviews, to measure such things as the sources of news of American adults. Trend data from these multi-staged, area probability samples have been reported in Roper (1977) as well as earlier publications.

Figures 1 and 2, which summarize these data, show several rather important trends. First, Figure 1 shows that respondents have increasingly indicated that television is the source most relied on for

"news about what's going on in the world today." In contrast the percentages of persons selecting newspapers and radio have decreased rathe markedly over time. While the data seem to indicate some slackening in these trends (a conclusion reinforced by data presented by Lad , 1979), television remains dominant in the recent samplings.

The trend toward increased reliance on television is even more obvious in Figure 2, which examines in more detail the responses reported in Figure 1. In the first figure, responses were coded to give credit to each medium mentioned in the case of multiple responses. In Figure 2, respondents giving multiple responses have been eliminated. The Figure shows the rather dramatic increase in the percentage of respondents mentioning only television as their source of news of the world. The percentage mentioning newspapers only, by contrast, has remained very similar across the nearly 20 years of the study.

One possible explanation for the increased reliance on television is that new audience members, the young who are increasingly better educated than their predecessors, are responsible for the shift. Data presented in Figures 3 and 4, however, indicate this explanation is rather unlikely. These previously unreported data indicate that at least for the 1963 to 19 period (for which data on age of respondents was available), the pattern of shift toward television is rather simila across age groups. And a simple comparison of percentages from 1963 versus 1975 shows that older respondents, rather than the young, are moving toward television. These data are consistent with other data from a shorter time span reported by J. Robinson (1978).

Data in Figure 4 similarly indicate that the shift toward television has taken place across educational subgroups. As is true for age, no single group is responsible for the general trend.

In summary, these data show that two demographic variables available for analysis, age and education, do not explain the shift toward dependence on television news. While it is true that these two variables are correlated with television dependence at any given time (the groups remain distinct in Figures 3 and 4) and age and education may be functionally related to initial levels of dependence, they are not responsible for the change in overall level of television dependence from 1959 to 1976. Some period effect, possibly associated with growth of the television medium itself, is a better explanation of the overall trend.

The Columbus Study

The Columbus data result from telephone interviews conducted in the Spring of 1978 with 600 household heads in metropolitan Franklin County, Ohio. Respondents were chosen probabilistically to represent household heads 18 years old or older living in Columbus and its suburbs. Persons who did not read a newspaper at least once a week, however, were oversampled in the study. While other studies showed approximately nine percent of household heads in the community do not read a newspaper at least once a week, 24 percent of the sample members fit that classification. (See Becker, Collins and Fruit, 1980, for additional details of the study.)

Three different sets of measures were used to create dependency indices. First, respondents were asked to indicate, in two separate items, from which medium they usually obtained most of their news "about what's going on in Washington and around the nation" and "about what's going on in Columbus and Franklin County." This item mirrors to a considerable extent that used in the Roper surveys discussed above

In addition, respondents were asked to indicate how many days they read a newspaper and, "on the average day," about how many minutes they spent reading that paper. Similarly, respondents were asked how many days a week they watched local early evening television news, earl evening network news, and late evening local news. Respondents also were asked, "on the average day" about how many radio newscasts they actually paid attention to.

The final relevant set of items asked respondents: "How much would you say you depend on (selected medium) to find out what is going on here in Columbus and Franklin County? Would you say a great deal, some, or hardly at all?" A similar item was asked about "Washington and around the nation." Included in the list were newspapers, radio and television news.

Most past research has measured dependency in terms of selective use (based on items of the first and second type above) and assumed that such selectivity results from dependency. Such an assumption, of course, is open to serious challenge. While the third type of measure employed here is certainly obtrusive, resulting from self-report, it does offer some improvement over the simpler indices. The actual relationships between the simple measure of reliance (Roper-type question), the more traditional measures of use, and the self-report indices of dependency are shown in Table 1. In each case, responses for the local and national level are combined to give one index of (a) reliance (b) use and (c) self-reported dependence.

The data, in general, show high correlations between the three measures. The correlations, however, are far from perfect, indicating that each dimension would contribute unique variance to an index based on a simple combination of the three. Such an index, equally weighting

these three dimensions, was therefore created and is shown in Table 1 as the Summed Index. The assumption in creating the separate dependency indices for newspapers, television and radio, of course, was that it is meaningful to speak independently of such dependencies. Empirical support for such a notion was obtained from a factor analysis of the self-report dependency items before they were used to create the above indices. The analysis is presented in Table 2 and demonstrates the rather striking clustering of the dependence items. Three items not mentioned above, measuring dependence on magazines for national news (there are no local equivalents) and dependence on interpersonal sources for both local and national news are included here to present a full picture. The magazine items tend to load with newspapers, though only weakly, while the interpersonal items are rather independent. Varimax rotation was used and the number of factors generated was determined by setting the eigenvalue at 1.0.

While orthogonal rotation was used for Table 2, a separate analysis using oblique rotation also was performed. The picture was much the same. The correlation between the newspaper and television factors was .11, while the correlation between the newspaper and radio factors was .13. The radio and television factors were correlated -.09. The interpersonal factor was correlated .05 with newspapers, -.05 with television and .14 with radio.

Needs of the individual respondents in the Columbus study also were determined by self-report. Questions, however, were not media specific (Becker, 1979), and were meant to measure needs which the media may or may not satisfy. The items were written in an attempt to measure three major dimensions of such needs (Becker, 1979; Blumler,

1979): an informational need, an entertainment and escape need, and an active need to avoid controversy, particularly in government. To this end, a battery of needs was presented to respondents, and they were asked to indicate how important each was to them. A factor analysis (similar to that used above) was then performed and three indices were created; items not loading clearly on any of the factors were dropped. Examples of items included in the informational dimension index were: it is important to keep up with latest events here in Columbus and it is important to have opinions on local issues. The entertainment dimension was measured by items asking how important it was to see or hear things entertaining or amusing and how important it was to have opportunities to forget about problems and just relax. The avoidance dimension was measured by asking how important it was to avoid hearing about issues and problems both locally and nationally. The informational index included items, the entertainment index, and the avoidance index.

The analysis strategy involved regressing each of the dependency indices (for newspaper, television and radio) on these gratifications, which were considered to intervene between demographic classifications and dependence. While the expectation was that the informational need would show the strongest relationship to dependence on the media for news, there were reasons to include the other need measures as well. If respondents select a news medium more for the entertainment value of that medium than for the news it offers, the entertainment need might show a positive relationship with a given dependence measure. Similarly, if audience members select a medium because they think it will not disturb them through presentation of conflict and controversy

the need to avoid such materials should be related to a given dependency. The dependency indices were regressed on several demographic variables, controlling for needs, to determine any direct effects of these demographic variables.

The pattern of relationships between the needs and the dependency indices are indicated in Table 3 by the beta weights shown at the top of the table. These weights do not reflect the effects of controlling for the demographic variables, since the latter were considered to precede the needs. The beta coefficients, however, do represent the independent effects of the specified needs controlling for the remaining two needs.

The informational need is linked to both newspaper and television news dependence, though not to dependence on radio. The entertainment need, on the other hand, is linked only to radio. And the need to avoid local and national controversy is linked, though not very strongly to television news dependence.

Newspaper dependence, after controlling for the effects of the measured needs, is predicted by education, age, and, to a slight degree, race. The better educated, the older and white respondents are more likely to be newspaper dependent than their counterparts. Television dependence, on the other hand, is predicted by age alone in the set of measured demographics. The older are more likely to be television dependent. Radio dependence is predicted by marital status and age. The young and unmarried are more likely to be dependent on this medium than the older, married members of the community. Only for radio, it is interesting to note, is lifestyle much of a factor. Number of years in a community, nature of housing, and sex are not linked

to the three dependence measures.

These data contrast to some extent with data reported by Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) and Weaver, Wilhoit and Riede (1979). Katz and his colleagues, in their study of Israelis, found that when the media are examined in terms of their interchangeability television is more similar to radio than newspapers, and radio is equally similar to newspapers and television. The Columbus data suggest that the informational need can be satisfied by either television or newspapers, but not very well by radio. Radio dependence results, rather, from a desire to be entertained. While Weaver, et al., found that total number of hours of television viewing was negatively related with the informational need, these data suggest a positive relationship between such a need and dependence on television for news. While the need to avoid controversy also is linked to dependence on television news, the relationship is noticeably weaker than for the informational need. To a certain extent, the different findings for these studies reinforce the notion that dependency is not equivalent to use of the medium. Also, the needs which predict dependence on television news most certainly are different from the needs which predict use of the non-news content of that medium.

The Madison Study

Secondary analysis of the Madison, Wisconsin, data was undertaken to test for the linkage of the informational need to newspapers and television news dependence over time. In other words, by examining the relationship between the informational need at one point in time and dependence at a later point, it should be possible to establish more convincingly a causal relationship between the two

variables. If a medium is satisfying a need, over time a dependence on that medium should grow. So a lagged relationship between measures of the need and measures of dependence should be present.

The Madison data were gathered as part of a four-year study of young and older voters (McLeod, Becker and Byrnes, 1974; McLeod, Brown, Becker and Ziemke, 1977; McLeod, Durall; Ziemke and Bybee, 1979). The first wave of the study was conducted in the fall of 1972, and young voters entering the political system for the first time were oversampled to facilitate comparisons with the older counterparts. The second wave, which included a panel of respondents from the 1972 study, was fielded in 1974. In 1976 the third wave of the study was fielded; a panel of respondents from the 1974 study was included though no respondents from the 1972 interviewing were recontacted.

Included in each wave of the study were measures of informational needs somewhat similar to those used in the Columbus study. One significant difference, however, resulted from the linkage of these needs to the political campaign and content of the media. In other words, respondents were asked if the needs applied to their use of the media in the political campaign. While each wave of the study employed slightly different measures of these needs, the items were judged similar enough to compare the indices from the two panels.

Roper-type measures of dependence were included in each study.

Again, these measures were not identical from study to study, but the differences were judged to be rather slight.

Respondents were sorted into two groups: (a) the young voters, or persons 24 years old or younger in 1972, and (b) the older voters,

or persons older than 25 in 1972. Cross-lagged correlational analyses were performed and are summarized in Table 4 (Rozelle and Campbell, 1969).

The auto correlations are presented at the top of each half of the table (labeled a, b and c in the Table) and they show that, for each of the measures and for both panels, T_1 and T_2 measures of the same variable are not very highly related. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine whether this lack of consistency across time in such variables as information need and dependency is attributable to real change or the different measures used. For three of the four comparisons, however, it is clear that young voters demonstrate less stability than the older respondents, as would be expected if the instability is attributable to real change in the variables across time. There also is no evidence that the instability is greater for the 1972-74 panel versus the 1974-76 panel, though the more radical change in measures took place between the 1972 and 1974 surveys.

The key correlations in Table 4 are d and e for newspaper dependency and f and g for dependency on television news. Here the case is rather mixed. For the 1972-74 panels, there is some slight evidence that the informational need in 1972 predicts to reliance on newspapers for news of the 1974 campaign (in the case of young voters and reliance on television news (for both young and older voters). And in each of those cases, there is little evidence that the influence is working in the opposite direction (d is greater than e for the young and f is greater than g for both age groups.)

For the 1974-76 panels, however, this pattern does not emerge. Only in the case of older respondents is there any evidence that

information need at T_1 is linked with dependency at T_2 and here the finding is only for newspaper dependency and the correlation is considerably smaller than the relationship between dependency at T_1 and information need at T_2.

No simple explanation for the discrepancies is readily available, and at best the data can only be considered as suggestive of the kinds of analyses which need to be performed with larger panels and improved measures. The measures used in 1972 and 1976 differ from those used in 1974 in that the context of the former was a presidential campaign while the context of the latter was a congressional campaign. The differences resulting from the campaigns may be more significant than would seem to be the case on the surface. O'Keefe (1979), as noted above, found that the campaign context itself was the most promising explanatory factor in looking at shifts in levels of dependence across time.

Conclusions

Several findings from the three studies merit repetition. First, the national trend data show that increased dependence on television news over time has taken place for all educational subgroups and seems to be relatively consistent for age groups as well, with the exception that the youngest segments of the population have not shown this shift toward television.

Second, the cross-sectional data show that the individual needs of the audience members are linked to dependence levels. Specificall a need for public affairs information is positively associated with dependence on newspapers and television news, but not dependence on radio news. A need for entertainment, on the other hand, is assoc-

iated only with radio, where the linkage is positive. A need to avoid public conflict and controversy is related to television news dependence but not to the other dependencies.

These linkages illustrate something of the nature of the differences among the media. News is not wholly separate from the other content. Because television is predominantly an involving medium allowing for escape, the need to avoid controversy shows a slight relationship with dependence on that medium's news content. Radio news, on the other hand, is almost completely integrated into the entertainment content of that medium. People who have a high need for entertainment are more likely to depend on that medium for news than are those who do not have high levels of that need.

The cross-sectional data also show that dependence is associated with such demographic variables as education and age, though these social categories are not linked to the various dependencies in precisely the same way. For example, as age increases, dependency on newspapers and television news increases, but dependency on radio news decreases.

Different measures of dependency have been used in the literature. In fact, different types of measures were used in the studies reported on here. In the cross-sectional study, however, an attempt was made to empirically check on the relationships among these various types of measures. The three measurement approaches, based on reliance, media use, and self-reported dependence, are only moderately related to each other. These analyses show the importance of considering the appropriateness of the dependence measure.

In general, the data seem to support the arguments of Ball-Rokeach

and DeFleur that dependence emerges from the social fabric and individual needs. Both types of variables are related to levels of dependence on the media. But the demographic data available suggest such social classifications do not explain the identified shift to television dependence across time. Whether individual needs explain that shift is not yet clear. It may well be that the shift toward television dependence is a period effect associated with the growth of the medium and the increase in news programming during that growth. The shift toward increased television dependence seems to have leveled off during recent years, when the amount of news programs has leveled off.

The starting point for these analyses was the observation that dependence on television news has been associated in the literature with the development of a political malaise--lowered levels of knowledge of political affairs on the part of audience members and negative evaluations of the political system. The findings take on added meaning in that context.

If the dependence on television news begins again to increase, for example, the suggestion is that the political malaise will grow as well. The malaise can be expected to develop across age and educational subgroups, since increased dependence on television has been relatively consistent across such groups.

The data reported here, however, suggest that if there is an explanatory factor for the increased dependence on either television or newspapers it will probably come from an examination of the needs of audience members, which are clearly related to such dependence. Dependence on television is predicted by the level of informational need of the audience members. But there also is a slight relationship

between the need to avoid conflict and controversy and dependence on television news. It may well be that audience members are moving toward television news because they expect it will be least distressing in its presentation. Ironically, the generally conflictual nature of television news has been offered as one explanation for the relationship between dependence on that medium and the negative evaluations of the political system. If these relationships are indeed of signifiance, it may well be that audience members select television in part to avoid conflict, yet the conflict included in the news presentation of the medium is the very thing producing the frustration they experience. Such frustration may lead to the need for conflict avoidance.

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Table 1

Correlations Among Measures of Dependency

	Reliance	Use	Self-Report
Newspapers			
Reliance	-		
Use	.37	-	
Self-Report	.49	.66	-
Summed Index	.75	.83	.88
Television			
Reliance	-		
Use	.28	-	
Self-Report	.42	.47	-
Summed Index	.79	.70	.79
Radio			
Reliance	-		
Use	.20	-	
Self-Report	.40	.39	-
Summed Index	.70	.66	.86

Note: Pair-wise deletion was used for computation of the correlation coefficients. Minimum N=568.

Table 2

Varimax Rotated (Orthogonal) Factor Matrix:

Self-Reported Dependency Items

Depend on: Medium/News	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Newspapers/local news	-.08	-.06	.83	.04
Newspapers/national news	.01	-.05	.89	.04
Radio/local news	.81	.03	.02	-.08
Radio/national news	.95	.03	.07	-.02
Television/local news	-.06	-.06	.02	.82
Television/national news	-.04	.01	.09	.90
People/local news	.00	.90	.00	-.03
People/national news	.06	.85	.01	-.03
Magazines/national news	.08	.05	.18	.02
Percent Variance	23.1	20.6	18.7	16.7

N=572

Table 3

Multiple Rs and Beta Weights for Regression:

Three Types of Media Dependency as Dependent Variables

	Newspaper Dependency	Television Dependency	Radio Dependency
Gratifications			
Multiple R	.26*	.28*	.14***
Informational	.25**	.27**	-.06
Entertainment	-.06	-.00	.11**
Avoidance	-.07	.12**	.04
Demographics			
Multiple R	.42*	.38*	.30*
Yrs. in community	.04	.05	-.06
Housing (hi=own)	.05	-.09	.05
Marital status (hi=single)	-.07	-.09	.18**
Education	.22**	-.04	-.01
Age	.20**	.16**	-.14**
Race (hi=white)	.10**	-.09	.08
Sex (hi=male)	-.05	-.06	.02

N=513

*Significant at the .05 level, using test for incremental variance explained.
**Beta is significant at the .05 level.
***Significant at the .10 level, using test for incremental variance explained.

Table 4

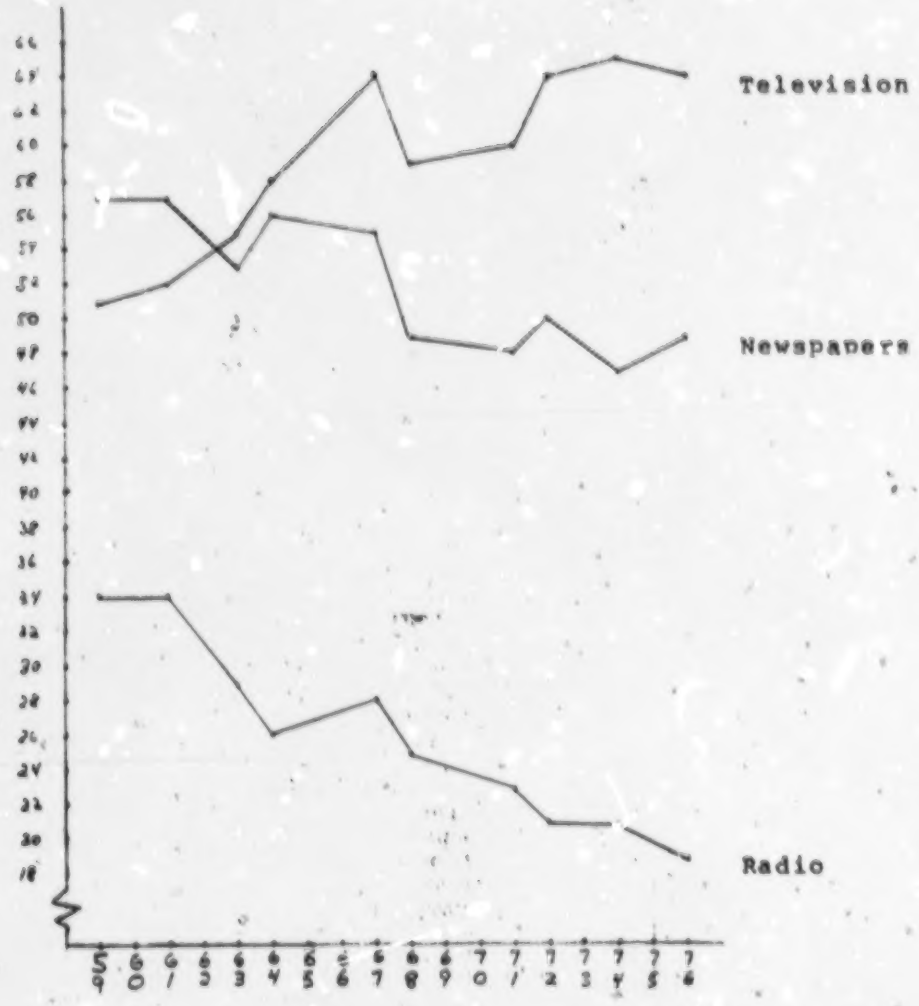
Cross-Lagged Correlational Data:

Madison Panels

Young Voters	1972-4 Panel	1974-6 Panel
a. Info. need T_1 x T_2	.36	.35
b. Depend newsp. T_1 x T_2	.41	.24
c. Depend. tv T_1 x T_2	.36	.37
d. Info. need T_1 x Depend newsp. T_2	.11	-.02
e. Depend newsp. T_1 x Info. need T_2	.04	-.14
f. Info. need T_1 x Depend. tv T_2	.19	-.01
g. Depend. tv T_1 x Info. need T_2	.05	.20
N =	(82)	(74)
Older Voters		
a. Info. need T_1 x T_2	.41	.30
b. Depend newsp. T_1 x T_2	.18	.53
c. Depend. tv T_1 x T_2	.52	.56
d. Info. need T_1 x Depend newsp T_2	-.17	.23
e. Depend. newsp. T_1 x Info. need T_2	-.10	.44
f. Info. need T_1 x Depend tv T_2	.10	.05
g. Depend. tv T_1 x Info. need T_2	.03	.28
N =	(99)	(57)

Figure 1

Source of News About World



Note: Multiple responses were coded.

Figure 2

Source of News About World:

Analysis if Multiple Responses

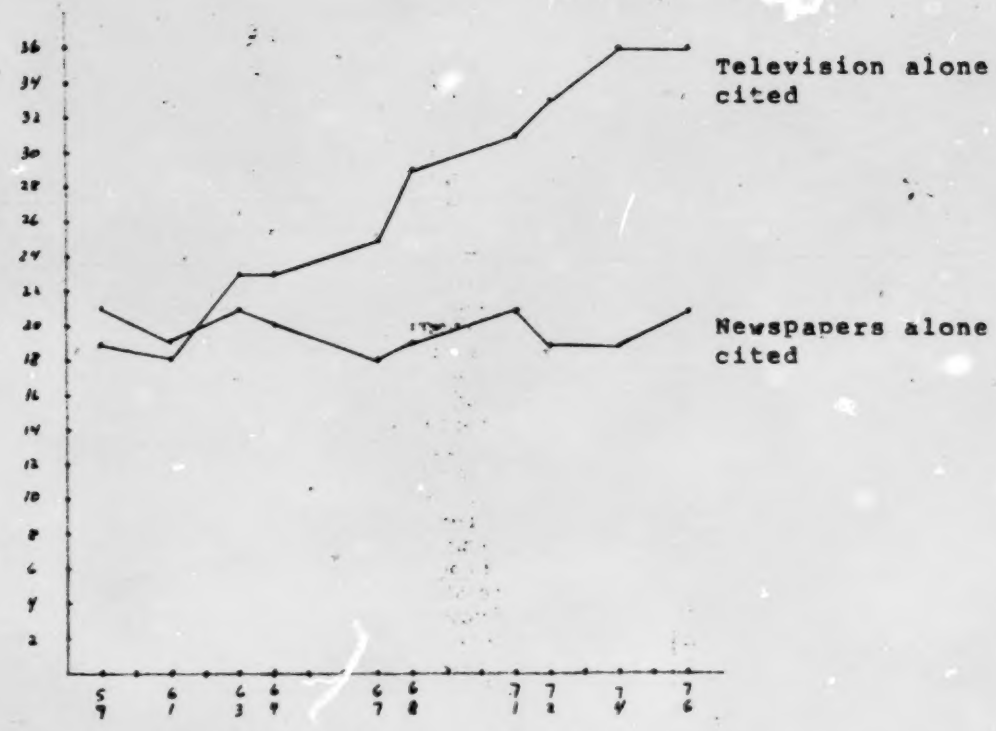
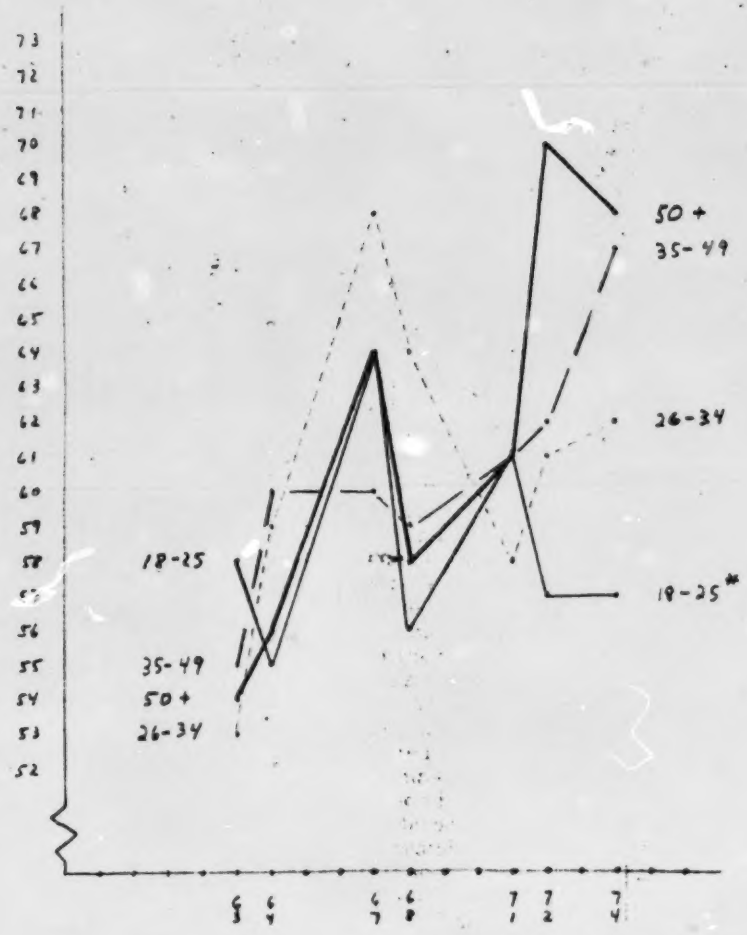


Figure 3

Source of News About World: By Age

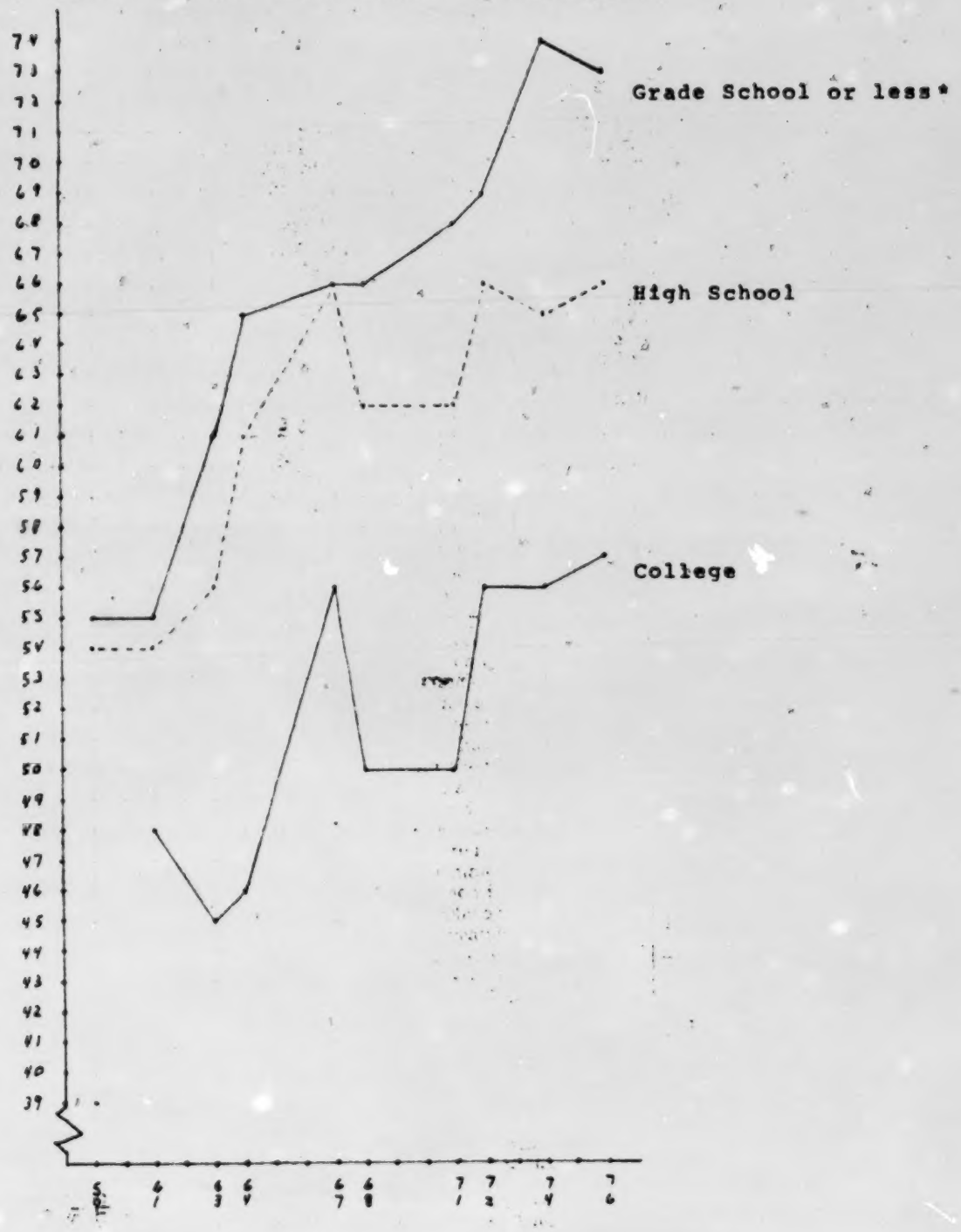


Note: Multiple responses coded.

*From 1963 to 1968, this was 21-25; from 1971 to 1974, it was 18-25. In 1976, the category was changed to include older respondents.

Figure 4

Source of News About World: By Education



Note: Multiple responses are coded.

*Indicates when schooling ended.